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ABSTRACT

Conflict resolution must be approached in a particular way by professional school counselors who seek to minimize conflict without discouraging growth and development in their students. This article acknowledges the growing interest in conflict resolution among professional counselors and explains how resolution interventions may be tempered by a concern for social development in children. Proactive suggestions are also offered for school counselors on how to assess and deal with conflict in school settings so that the counselor can help provide a safe school environment in which students can participate in experimental play that fosters social interactional experience. Much of what the counselor does to accomplish this task consists of monitoring, modeling, and in some instances, direct intervention into social relationships and encounters of the students. Thus the conflict resolution skills of the counselor fuels the momentum for developmental guidance activities that reinforce the human values of the school community. Conceptually, the professional school counselor serves as a resource for children as they learn the limits of personal autonomy within the context of social expectations and roles. Such limits are defined at the point at which social cooperation becomes a learned competency and a legitimate expectation for the autonomous individual. Contains 25 references. (BF)

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CONFLICT RESOLUTION FOR SCHOOL COUNSELORS:
FACILITATION AND SOCIAL LEARNING

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Abstract

This article acknowledges the growing interest in conflict resolution among professional counselors and explains how resolution interventions may be tempered by a concern for social development in children. The article surveys significant issues related to conflict and development as a general guide for professional school counselors who are called upon to help resolve childhood conflict within the school community.

Conflict Resolution for School Counselors:
Facilitation and Social Learning

As a naturally occurring phenomenon arising from human interaction, conflict may be a primary method whereby school children learn social rules and social roles. For this reason, conflict resolution must be approached in a particular way by professional school counselors who seek to minimize conflict without discouraging growth and development in their students. This article offers proactive suggestions for school counselors on how to assess and deal with conflict in school settings. Additionally, it presents a survey of the role that conflict and its resolution can play in the social development of the child.

In a practical sense, an understanding of the relationship between conflict and development in children can contribute to the counselor's own professional development by generating a clinical "wisdom" that allows certain distinctions to be made. School counselors seek to assist their students along the most productive developmental paths. When conflict does arise, however, it is clinical wisdom which allows the counselor to know when to act and when not to act to resolve conflict --- a distinction

which weighs the value of social learning against possible emotional or physical harm. This article seeks to help school counselors construct a professional rationale on which such distinctions can be based.

Conflict, Play, and Social Learning

Regardless of the negative connotations, not all conflict is harmful. Bolton (1979) pointed out that conflict can encourage intimacy, development, and personal and intellectual growth. Similarly, Steenbarger (1991) observed that life-span theory has helped us better understand the role of crisis in the developmental process. Conflict and crisis produced by conflict serve to teach important lessons about life and about the social world to children who are learning to be "people." Conflict takes place in the social world as interactional disputes. The inherent teaching potential of the social world is a main source of new information and new wisdom for children. Greeno (1989) noted that this inherent characteristic of the social world may play a determining role in the ability of the child to think about "...novel problems and learn in new domains (p. 139)."

Additionally, the social interactional aspects of conflict are important to how children act and react to others. Friendship among children may,

for example, help determine how they resolve conflict, while non-friends may devote their efforts to "negotiations" to decide whether interaction will even take place (Hartup, 1989). Thus from one perspective, conflict can be seen as experimental "play" involving negotiation, persuasion, and continual situational assessment by the disputants. Littlejohn and Jabusch (1987), addressing the issue of persuasion, noted that such interactions take the form of conflict and negotiation, dominance and submission, or problem solving. Learning successful and comfortable styles of negotiation thus becomes an important element of experimental play. What emerges developmentally for the child is self-esteem, appreciation for others, and social rules of interaction. Children who learn adequate skills for social interaction are better able to negotiate conflict outcomes and may express a wider repertoire of styles for resolving conflict. Feelings of inferiority may arise in children who do not achieve social adequacy (Aguilera & Messick, 1986). Evidence suggests that even children who are temperamentally inhibited can "change" through purposeful action (Kagan, 1989), action which is expressed in the social world in relationships with others. Conflict and its resolution may thus play a role in child development by providing children with ways to test new "ways of being."

Part of the socialization process through which children become "people" hinges directly upon the learning which takes place regarding comprehension of social norms of cooperation. The egocentrism characteristic of early developmental stages gives way to new learning about social cooperation and interactional expectations. Through play, children learn many of the lessons about what others expect of them as well as about what they can reasonably expect from others. Faw and Belkin (1989) noted that play helps children learn cooperation and non-physical forms of aggressiveness. Conflict arising in play is precisely that which children learn to resolve through some form of social negotiation, preferably that which honors the existing norms of cooperation.

Even in routine playing of organized games children learn rules and styles of conflict resolution. As Pruyser (1983) observed, participating in a game requires that the child accept some restrictions. The formal "rules" of a particular game provide these restrictions, but do not preclude conflict. To the extent that the interpretation of rules may be disputed, conflict can easily surface. Additionally, not all "games" have definitive rules, particularly those which are created in situ by the children themselves. So as games and play are created and accomplished as social acts, the players

must constantly find ways which will resolve conflict so that the play can continue. In many instances, then, resolution consists of finding methods of cooperation which will allow for continuation of the play in progress.

Children do not necessarily find such conflict disturbing because it emerges as such an integral part of the play itself. The developmental advantages of such social learning recognized by adults are beside the point for those involved. Most children do, however, learn well from such activities and are later able to function appropriately within human groups. The practical need to become a socially competent person in everyday life is a "survival" skill (Hamburg & Takanishi, 1989) that emerges in part from learning to deal effectively with conflict in peer groups.

Developmental Issues

Years ago Havighurst (1953) suggested that peer group activities among children can aid in the development of social values and roles, social cooperation, and social responsibility. The same holds true for informal, play-based activities that children organize and negotiate for themselves. Both cooperation and conflict arise continually, requiring children to find ways to resolve conflict before it disrupts the cooperation necessary for

continuation of play activity. The "give and take" of this social interaction provides the child with opportunities for direct learning about the way in which social encounters can be managed and accomplished.

Unfortunately, not all children learn such lessons of social negotiations well enough to handle conflict. Some become victims of more aggressive children and may possess few options for dealing with such aggression. Research evidence suggests that about one in every ten children may be severely abused by aggressive peers (Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988). This phenomenon does not, however, necessarily identify the victim as the one who has failed to learn conflict resolution and cooperation norms. Aggressive children may be at fault in that for a variety of reasons they have not learned to subordinate their own egocentrism to group norms of cooperation. The aggressive child may prefer physical or verbal aggression as a way of resolving conflict that supports the selfish ego. Thus the victim may merely be identified as the most vulnerable who is then given no opportunity to put into use alternative solutions to physical or verbal assault.

This is not to suggest that the victimizer lacks all knowledge of cooperative norms and non-aggressive resolution methods. Evans and

Evans (1985), for example, noted that early adolescence is a time of physical, emotional, and social changes in which "limits" are tested. These researchers concluded that classroom violence at this age may be indicative only of poor impulse control. Appropriate social learning may have occurred, but is not applied in actual situations because the individual child cannot control the impulse toward aggressiveness.

Such behavior may lead to a pattern of aggression in which the victim is given no choice to negotiate a settlement that would thwart the victim role. It is the vulnerability of victims which make them easy targets for aggressive conflict. The victimizer, on the other hand, does not choose anyone as a victim except those who are vulnerable to the aggression. The vulnerability of victims thus reinforces the behavior of the victimizers in that their strategies of aggression may be taken as a successful mode of conflict resolution.

Research in other domains suggests a strong relationship between conflict resolution skills and general social support (Barth, 1988). Children who learn and can express appropriate resolution skills that foster peer group cooperation may be those who, in turn, receive the most social support directly from their peers. In other words, it is as if the use of such

skills is taken by others as proof of a willingness to get along with group members in a cooperative venture. This willingness may then be rewarded by similar behavior on the part of other peer group members; cooperation begets cooperation from others.

To a degree, both the victim and the victimizer may be omitted from this reciprocal "agreement" in that they do not enjoy the mainstream social support from others. They are left with one another. The cycle of aggression and victimization remains a non-norm pattern which is anomalous to the group's usual way of resolving conflict among members. The idea that this cycle is triggered by impulse control problems is descriptive but not experiential; victimizers may see themselves as successful in that victims always lose. So in this regard, the strategy of aggression is effective as long as a vulnerable victim is available.

Hill (1984) found that children with peer relationship problems referred to a community clinic were considered more impaired and required more counseling sessions than did children without peer problems. So although victimization, as a form of peer relationship problem, may seem to be a valid strategy in conflict, it also may take a toll on the psychological well-being of the aggressive or victimized child.

Such developmental issues and problems may revolve around the learning of gender-linked social roles. Whereas boys may be more likely to display aggressive behaviors as a way of resolving conflict, girls may be more likely to use behaviors aimed at defusing the conflict in social encounters (Miller, Danaher, & Forbes, 1986). Boys may thus "test" the vulnerability of others by acting aggressively. How targeted children react to such aggression may determine whether they are identified as victims who can be used again to support the aggressor's egocentrism. The impulse control problem becomes a moot point if a victim is available --- there may simply be no incentive for aggressors to utilize other methods of conflict resolution, even if they do possess them. The fact that aggressive children behave differently or are more cooperative with children who have not been labelled as victims, suggests that the knowledge or capacity for cooperation is present to some degree even in aggressive children.

Female children who have learned to defuse conflict may nullify aggression and thus may not themselves become victims. It is as if their social skills to avoid and to resolve conflict are more "civilized" in that their self-expectations are tied to social role learning. This is not to suggest that girls are supposed to learn less confrontive methods, but merely that they

may do so as a result of learning dominant social role values. In any event, these values may be expressed in superior conflict resolution skills because, in contrast, boys may have been taught that maleness is linked to aggressive behaviors. During the years of childhood exploration, such social values may be exaggerated beyond what the world would tolerate from adults.

For all children, male and female alike, conflict may also involve issues of dignity and honor. The ability to resolve conflict successfully may enhance the child's self-esteem by proving social competency and "face-saving" abilities. Thus among peers, the child may be taken as a "person of consequence" who is predictable in group interaction.

Role of the Counselor

Learning conflict resolution skills is a complex matter for children. The professional school counselor who has a responsibility to facilitate such learning faces a formidable task. Conceptually, the counselor wants to help make this phase of growing up easier for the children, without reinforcing social values which foster cultural oppression. That is, modern, professional school counselors, by definition, dedicate their efforts to enhancing human development and potential. The goal of such counseling

is to help children grow into responsible, caring adults who are socially and academically competent.

Such goals and professional responsibilities may often place the counselor in a seemingly precarious position in relation to other aspects of social learning. The counselor may be "caught" between conflicting notions of individual autonomy and social commitment that prevails in our society. Thomas (1984) observed that schools may actively teach competitive norms that are inherently counterproductive to the construction of cooperation norms. So like their teaching colleagues, school counselors may have to help children learn the social meaning of a "mixed" message that strong individualism is just as desirable as strong social cooperation.

Children are faced with the difficult lesson that individualism and self-reliance are worthy developmental goals for the autonomous person, while cooperation is equally worthy when it comes to the individual participating in group or social interaction. The school counselor must somehow help facilitate this message without pretending that reality is otherwise, without restricting experimental play, without depriving children of the learning experiences of social negotiation, and without perpetuating self-defeating, victimizing, or oppressive values.

The importance and the nature of the counselor's role in such a situation can perhaps be most easily discerned through examination of gender-linked issues embedded in learning to handle conflict. For example, Watson and Remer (1984) speculated in their research that grown women may suppress conscious reactions to threatening or unpleasant communication. If such differences result from social learning, should the school counselor perpetuate such practices with children by honoring traditional gender roles? Or should all children be treated the same, regardless of gender? What sort of conflict resolution skills would a female student need to develop to become a corporate executive - - - those dictated by traditional social roles or more aggressive ones?

Similarly, what sort of resolution skills should boys learn? Barclay (1980) pointed out that a multitude of mass media messages of aggression and violence influence the development of moral values in young adolescent males. In the sense that counselors want to help children develop into socially competent people, what constitutes social competency in a society that teaches violence and aggression as ways of dealing with others? Should school counselors abide by the apparent values reflected in the mass media, or should they attempt to instill more civilized values?

And which would be best for the child who needs practical skills for survival in the adult world?

There are, of course, no easy answers to such questions. Yet counselors can make a significant contribution to child development by recognizing the many points of contradiction about what children should learn. It is important for counselors to make a clear distinction between how children learn social negotiation from the natural setting of their own experimental play, and how they learn counterproductive role expectations from adults and the society at large. The counselor can best accomplish the task of enhancing development of conflict negotiation skills by focusing attention upon the natural play activities of the child's peer group. While many social values may often conflict with what the child learns through play, the lessons of play have a natural "feel" for children that the mass media cannot match. That is, what children learn for themselves through play, they create as viable resolution methods those relevant ideas from self-discovery.

The school counselor can be a vital part of this process by providing an environment in which children can explore the limits of what they learn in a constructive way. Managing or helping resolve conflict is a legitimate

service and program area for the school counselor (West, Kayser, Overton, & Saltmarsh, 1991). Conflict resolution skills can roughly be divided between those which depend on aggression and the threat of violence, and those which do not. Through intentional intervention, the professional counselor can help foster the latter in several distinct ways.

To begin with, children need a safe, secure, and stable environment in which to learn conflict resolution and social negotiation methods through experimental play. Because safety and security are related to a stable environment, counselors may feel the need to respond to every conflict for the sake of authoritative discipline. There is no doubt that some conflict requires immediate action to preserve discipline within the school community. However, if every conflict were to be handled in such a fashion, children would not have as many opportunities to learn about the "give and take" of social interaction. Thus resolution by mandate may be contrary to the developmental well-being of the individual child.

The way children observe conflict being resolved in the home environment also influences the way they learn to deal with conflict in their own lives. For example, children who grow up in a family in which conflict is resolved through the use of power and intimidation, will likely experience

difficulty in resolving conflict by other means, such as negotiation. Such children may simply have not had many opportunities to negotiate resolution because all conflict in the family has been resolved through authoritative mandate without discussion.

School counselors serve as powerful role models for children and are thus in a unique position to model and demonstrate appropriate, socially acceptable methods of resolving conflict. In a sense, every modeled resolution contains a potential lesson through which children can improve their own skills and awareness of human conflict.

For developing children, learning alternative skills to confrontation, arguing, threats, and violence becomes crucial. The professional school counselor may be in a position to help teach children new cognitive skills which give them a wider variety or wider choice of thought and action (see, for example, Hernstein, Nickerson, de Sanchez, & Swets, 1986) when faced with interpersonal conflict. These cognitive skills could, in turn, improve children's sociolinguistic skills needed to distinguish between literal composition of messages and their social context and meaning (see Green, 1989). In support of developmental goals, counselors can provide activities which will:

1. Encourage children to find creative, non-violent resolutions to their own conflicts arising in play and social interaction.
2. Allow monitoring of escalating conflict among children to protect their well-being.
3. Emphasize explanations to students resolutions implemented by the counselor so they understand the rationale.
4. Assess emerging conflict for its potential value in learning against its potential for excessive aggression or violence.
5. Allow for the coordination of interventions with school administrators and teachers.
6. Focus upon utilization of general counseling skills to model socially acceptable, effective resolutions.

This list is not exhaustive; school counselors can use their own creativity to design activities particularly suited to local conditions and specific student situations. It is important, however, for the counselor to approach conflict monitoring and resolution in a systematic, purposeful way so that contingencies that might distract from child development will not be overlooked.

Conflict Assessment

Appropriate assessment of conflict is a vital activity for the school counselor. Given the importance and the naturalness of conflict as social learning, conflict assessment should first be approached from the perspective that participation in conflict is not in itself a sign of psychopathology or of behavioral problems. There is a need, however, to separate needless conflict from that which constitutes experimental play. For instance, conflict which originates among children and is eventually resolved among them usually does not require any intervention by the counselor. Of course the counselor can monitor such conflict to make certain that it does not escalate beyond its natural context, and can take direct action should the need arise.

Some kinds of conflict, however, may arise outside the immediate scope of experimental play --- between children and family members or between children and human services agencies of one kind or another. In such instances the professional school counselor may have an additional role to play in recognizing typical "symptoms." For example, depression in a child may indicate problems with peers (Hart, 1991) and may signal the counselor that maladaptive social skills are affecting the child's relationship

with adults as well. Similarly, periods of transition in school programs, such as moving from elementary to middle school, may increase the conflict between child and parents (Papini, Clark, Jawanda, & Savage, 1989).

Comprehensive assessment of conflict may include questions such as the following:

1. What is the topic of the conflict as understood by the participants?
2. Who are the participants and what are their histories in regard to prior conflicts?
3. What are the antecedents to the present conflict as understood by the participants?
4. What do the participants believe is "at stake" in the current conflict?
5. What attempts have the participants made toward resolution? Are there alternatives?
6. What is the probable outcome of the conflict if the counselor does not intervene?
7. How will continuation of the conflict influence the quality of the school environment and community?

8. How will continuation or resolution of the conflict influence the development of the participants?
9. How would the current conflict be viewed from the perspective of local school policies?

Answers to such questions can help the school counselor assess conflict as a professional helper. Conclusions reached through such assessment questions can help define worthwhile courses of action open to the counselor. From the perspective of management, assessment can allow counselors to stay abreast of continuing conflict so they can provide professional advice to administrators, teachers, families, and other interested human service professionals.

An important aspect of conflict assessment has to do with the relationship between perceived control and responsibility among children. Ortman (1988) described the importance that young people attach to feeling that they are in control of their lives, and that an emerging sense of responsibility may follow such feelings. Conflict originating and resolved among peer group members --- whether through experimental play or routine social interaction --- gives children the opportunities to experience some outcome control before they reach adulthood. The school counselor

should recognize the "trial and error" method inherent in all social experimentation and not automatically assume that errors denote psychopathology or insufficient socialization.

Much of what the counselor can do in this regard is limited to monitoring, modeling, and, as a last resort, intervening with methods aimed at maximizing the "trials" without depriving the child of the opportunity for the "errors." In other words, the main tool in this process is the counselor's professional wisdom about social learning as a process. Assessment leads to intervention only when the counselor perceives through such wisdom that conflict in progress cannot or will not be resolved without harm to the participants.

Conclusion

In summary, professional school counselors have a multi-faceted task in regard to how they assist students in learning about and dealing with conflict. On one hand, students need conflict in order to learn the important lessons of social negotiations. On the other hand, they also need to be protected from conflict and crisis which has escalated toward violence or oppression.

The counselor helps provide a safe school environment in which students can participate in experimental play that fosters social interactional experience. Much of what the counselor does to accomplish this task consists of monitoring, modeling, and, in some instances, direct intervention into social relationships and encounters of the students. Thus the conflict resolution skills of the counselor fuels the momentum for developmental guidance activities that reinforce the human values of the school community.

Conceptually, the professional school counselor serves as a resource for children as they learn the limits of personal autonomy within the context of social expectations and roles. Such limits are defined at the point at which social cooperation becomes a learned competency and a legitimate expectation for the autonomous individual.

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